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# **The Pinnacle of Popular Taste?: The Importance of *Confessions of a Window Cleaner***

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## **Introduction**

The British sexploitation film has recently received recognition as an important genre, and has subsequently been the focus of increased critical attention. The contributions of I.Q Hunter (2008) and Matthew Sweet (2005) along with work by Ian Conrich (1998), Leon Hunt (1998) and David McGillivray (1992) have recognized the importance of this frequently neglected genre and helped reposition it within British cinema. In his recent work, Hunter has examined the variety of the genre and the number of sub-genres which can be categorised as sexploitation, from the morality tales of *Groupie Girl* (1970) and *Take an Easy Ride* (1976) to tales of individual sexual prowess such as *The Ups and Downs of a Handyman* (1975) and *Adventures of a Taxi Driver* (1976). Leon Hunt has also authoritatively demonstrated the fluidity of the genre and suggested how sexploitation began to spill into horror films such as *House of Whipcord* (1974) and *Killer's Moon* (1978).

However, more remains to be done in order to fully understand the appeal and potency of the genre and of its significant texts. I want to consider one of the most popular, influential and successful sexploitation texts of the 1970s which moved the sexploitation film in a new direction, namely *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* (1974). This film was one of the most popular of the sexploitation genre, and its backing by a major studio ensured that it became part of the commercial mainstream, rather than the grubby fringes more commonly associated with films of this genre. Using new archival material, I examine what the film offered and how it was deliberately crafted in order to appeal to a variety of audiences; effectively, what was it doing that other sexploitation films did not do?

Loathed by critics, the film was dismissed as tawdry and vulgar yet its massive popular appeal makes it an important indicator of popular taste in the much-maligned 1970s. As Hunter has recognised, such films offered "valuable insights into the tastes, values and frustrated desires of ordinary filmgoers" (Hunter, 2008: 3). We cannot dismiss the film on the grounds of its quality, for as Andy Medhurst has recently pointed out in relation to the *Carry On* films, "texts which are abysmal by most conventional aesthetic standards can nonetheless have significant importance when considering the complicated dynamics of identity and belonging" (Medhurst, 2007: 140). The massive popularity of the film makes

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it significant in terms of audience preferences, and I want to consider what it was about the film that could have appealed to a contemporary audience.

Matthew Sweet has labelled 1970s sex-comedies as "neither funny nor sexy," yet *Window Cleaner* did manage to appeal to audiences (Sweet, 2005: 208). Contemporary industry responses to the film also failed to recognise the appeal of the material, with *Films and Filming* complaining, "*Confessions of a Window Cleaner* might well be re-titled *Confessions of the British; what they don't know about making films, making erotic images, making people laugh and making love*. We probably don't clean windows too well either" (Stuart, 1974: 62). In a recent interview, Robin Askwith recalled that the film industry was "totally negative about films like *Confessions* [...] [they were] totally ignoring the fact that people were going to see them in droves" (Needham).

Upon its release, the film ran for nine weeks in one West End cinema, with 29 performances each week, finally taking over £30,000 (Williamson, 1974: 4). By January 1975 – 14 months after its release – the film had earned £200,000 from the Eady Levy fund, and by 1979 profits had topped £800,000. [\[1\]](#) The film's popularity was matched by its profitability, a rare feat for any British film in the period. What the film was selling, the audience was certainly buying. It is for this reason that *Window Cleaner* can no longer be omitted from serious investigations of the film culture of the period. It is slightly misleading to consider the film as one of *the* most popular British film texts of the decade; popular taste is difficult to define, and this difficulty is compounded by the lack of data and of the vast differences between popularity in regional areas. For example, despite its popularity in London and in Britain overall, at the Southampton Odeon *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* first played for one week, shared the bill with *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and took only £2508. The screening of the film was a full year after its national release, and its mediocre performance compares unfavourably to Ken Russell's *Tommy* (1975), which opened a few weeks later in the same cinema, ran for six weeks and took £6586 in the first seven days. [\[2\]](#)

In his important work on sexploitation, Leon Hunt recognises that the *Confessions* series deliberately targeted a gap in the market as a combination of "adult entertainment and good clean fun." The first film drew upon its cast, the source novels and the series' traditional aspects to help market itself (Hunt, 1998: 117-118). Yet who was being targeted by the film and how was this achieved? What aspects of the film's narrative and aesthetics were deployed to help ensure this popularity? The Michael Klinger papers housed at the University of West of England provide a unique insight into the production of the series, drawing upon Klinger's role as executive producer. I use this material to re-examine *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* in order to consider what the text offered to an audience and how the film's content, both comedic and sexual contributed to its success.

## From Text to Film

The provenance of *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* is made clear through the Klinger material; first-time producer Gregg Smith became interested in using Christopher Wood's best-selling "Timmy Lea" paperback novels as the basis for a series of films. The *Confessions* novels were one of the first examples of extremely low-brow popular literature crossing over into a visual medium. Author and scriptwriter Christopher Wood was not in any way like the fictional "Timmy Lea," but by presenting the texts as first-hand accounts, Wood accessed a mass readership, drawing upon literary conventions that position the audience as the privileged recipients of private information. The attempt to locate Timmy Lea as a real person was maintained in the films by the screen credit to "Timmy Lea" as the author of the source material, lending notions of authenticity to the material presented while at the same time allowing the sexual "real-life" antics to emerge as fantasy to titillate an audience.

Michael Klinger came to the project with the responsibility of raising the £100,000 budget, and his papers document his negotiations with a number of British financiers, including independent investors Caroline Enterprises and Lington Holdings. Despite his best efforts to secure funding, the various finance deals fell apart and Klinger had to approach a major studio to secure the necessary funds. After lengthy negotiations, Columbia agreed to fund the film, seeing in *Window Cleaner* the start of a successful series that could be distributed in world markets. Columbia recognised the potential of the series and agreed to help fund the project. This contrasts with other potential investors such as the Star Group, who declined to become involved in a "titillating sex film." [3] Columbia's backing of the project appears risky but demonstrates the prevailing uncertain, haphazard and occasionally adventurous film culture of the period. Additionally, the deal that Columbia brokered for the sequel allowing them 50 per cent of all profits from subsequent films suggests that whilst the studio was keen to invest in *Window Cleaner*, they used their investment opportunity to capitalise on any future successes, driving a very hard bargain in the process.

As the films were always designed to be a series, it is useful to briefly consider the different cultural tasks undertaken by each of the films. *Window Cleaner* is perhaps the most straightforward with its combination of sexploitation, comedy and conventional narrative. Early critiques of the screenplay referred to it as "breezy and bawdy [...] an amiable little script with no style of its own" whilst the ordinary characters, locations and scenarios proved popular with audiences seeking to be diverted by the film's content but reassured by its familiar setting and milieu. [4] *Confessions of a Pop Performer* (1975) swapped the solid domesticity of *Window Cleaner* for the more glamorous world of pop stardom with unsatisfactory results. As Klinger himself acknowledged, "in *Pop Performer* we allowed ourselves to be deviated from the original successful formula and

there is no question that it was not so successful." [5] Despite costing nearly twice as much as *Window Cleaner*, and with an album distribution deal with Polydor, the film's attempt to elevate the ordinary Timmy Lea to extraordinary pop star proved unsuccessful, with audiences preferring instead to see real music stars Roger Daltrey and David Essex on film in *Tommy* and *That'll Be The Day* (1973).

*Confessions of a Driving Instructor* (1976) was an attempt to recapture the successful formula of "a believable hero who the audience could relate to, in a believable family background that everyone could understand." [6] This film successfully tapped into the narrative of the young transient male, and was seen by the production team to be the most successful after *Window Cleaner*. Unrealised plans from 1978 suggested re-releasing *Window Cleaner* and *Driving Instructor*. The final film in the series, *Confessions from a Holiday Camp* (1977) again moved away from the domestic setting that had made *Window Cleaner* so successful, preferring instead to focus on the holiday camp as a location for typical British comedy, in the vein of *Carry On Camping* (1969). Michael Klinger objected to this shift in focus, complaining:

The script is a carefully contrived series of funny incidents but is totally without an acceptable storyline. Despite various meetings at which we all agreed that it was essential to maintain the family background and the relationship between our principal and permanent characters, this has now been totally ignored. [7]

Ultimately Klinger was proved right: the film did not match *Window Cleaner's* success, and it failed to convince Columbia to finance a fifth *Confessions* film, effectively ending the series.

As *Window Cleaner's* success was not matched by any of the subsequent films, the focus must remain upon this film as the more important cultural text. The film's £100,000 budget secured from Columbia places it firmly within the low-budget spectrum, and the film's aesthetic reflects these financial limitations. The involvement of a major studio in the production of the film – despite the best efforts of the production team to secure independent funding – demonstrates that in this period, parts of the British industry were still dependent on the Americans. Despite the withdrawal of investment following huge overseas losses, Hollywood studios were still willing to invest in British films. *Window Cleaner* is a product of the precarious economic conditions of the early 1970s, yet its phenomenal success far outstripped expectations of such a small-budget film. Yet from where was the film drawing its inspiration, and to whom was it trying to appeal?

### New Genre / New Audience?

Sexploitation comedy was made possible through a changing culture of permission and relaxation of some aspects of censorship. However, the aesthetics, themes and characters of this new genre drew upon an established film trend; the TV sitcom. The films of *Dad's Army* (1971), *Up Pompeii* (1971), *On the Buses* (1971) and *Steptoe and Son* (1972) performed well at the box office, and the *Confessions* films looked to this successful formula for inspiration. Timmy's working-class family of Tony Booth, Doris Hare, Dandy Nicholls and Bill Maynard could have been lifted directly from *Bless this House* (1972) or *On the Buses*, while guest stars in *Window Cleaner* included John Le Mesurier and Joan Hickson. Casting familiar faces from television was a deliberate strategy deployed by the production team who sought "useful UK names" to boost the profile of the film and to deliberately target the television audience [8].

There are other aspects of *Window Cleaner* that owe a great deal to the TV sitcom; Timmy's father works on the railways and brings home junk in a manner reminiscent of Albert Steptoe, whilst his mother's fondness for consumer items on credit recalls Stan's mother in *On the Buses* – perhaps unsurprising as they were both played at one time by Doris Hare. However, *Window Cleaner* utilises social class in an unusual way. The film's deployment of working-class stereotypes from the philandering Sid, to pregnant Rosie in her curlers and the kleptomaniac father offers a less than flattering depiction of a class usually treated more affectionately within British cinema and within the TV sitcom. So just what are the audience being encouraged to laugh at within *Window Cleaner*? Sociologist Simon Frith argued that:

The book is written in the form of a yob's autobiography but the author is clearly a writer of some skill and the resulting tone of class condescension feeds my suspicion that the prejudices to which the books are finally appealing are those of the middle classes against the great unwashed. This best seller reflects its reader's longing for a Britain in which everything the way it's supposed to be – women in bed or at the cooker, the workers in their slum, the bourgeoisie in their smart houses on the common. (Frith, 1978: 25)

Frith suggests that the books were deliberately produced for the amusement of the middle classes by successfully parodying the working class family. However, within the novels, it is not the respectable working class that is being presented: the Lea family border on the criminal. In the original text, Timmy has just been released from prison after being caught stealing lead from the church roof, a scenario which is omitted from the film in order to make the young hero sympathetic and hapless rather than criminal. The Klinger material supports this positioning of Timmy as the sympathetic hero, with an early suggestion of *Confessions from the Clink* as a possible sequel to *Window Cleaner* never being

mentioned again after February 1974, and more conventional choices of *Pop Performer*, *Plumber's Mate* and *Holiday Camp* being advocated instead. [\[9\]](#)

*Window Cleaner* accentuates class divisions with both the working class Lea family and the family of Timmy's girlfriend Elizabeth, operating on the margins of their respective classes. The Leas occupy the space at the bottom of the working class whilst the Radletts have been elevated to the top of the middle class, a shift designed to position Timmy and Elizabeth's relationship across a wide class divide. The focus on class marginality within the films allows working-class viewers to distance themselves from the lowly Leas, and middle-class viewers to aspire to the socially superior Radletts. The antics of Timmy's family at his aborted wedding reinforce their position within the texts as ridiculous characters. His mother wears an over-trimmed, home-made dress, his father in his top hat "borrowed" from the railway Lost Property Office becomes roaringly drunk, while his brother-in-law Sid attempts to seduce the bride. Such actions and character presentation emphasise the family's vulgarity and allows the lower working class to be parodied for the amusement of a socially superior audience.

The importance of class in the *Window Cleaner* is always combined with sex. Timmy clearly has a penchant for upper class girls, or as Sid puts it in *Driving Instructor* "It's the voice, isn't it? A touch of the Barbara Cartlands and you're anybody's!" From Elizabeth, the policewomen in *Window Cleaner* to Mary, the archery enthusiast in *Driving Instructor*, these unobtainable girls use language and mannerisms with which he is not familiar; their speech is sprinkled with "Mummy," "Daddy," "tiddly" and "rugger." Elizabeth cooks Spaghetti Bolognese and they watch a televised classical music concert, while Mary invites him to her parents' wine-tasting and enrolls him in a rugby match. Timmy attempts to be upwardly mobile and circumnavigate class barriers, while simultaneously remaining firmly rooted in his working-class background.

The importance of social class in these films echoes a heavily residual theme in British cinema. From *Room at the Top* (1959) and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), class consciousness permeates British cinema and is very much in evident in *Window Cleaner*. After the success of the film, scriptwriter Christopher Wood noted features which should be continued in subsequent films, including: maintaining the characters of Timmy as an endearing innocent and Sid as an incompetent schemer; continuing the family involvement; and providing Timmy with a potential marriage partner. [\[10\]](#) These strengths not only reiterate the importance of the films as a series, but also suggest the great conventionality of the texts, with their reliance on family and the importance of marriage.

Within the films, Timmy is to be provided with a nice, respectable girl to marry, suggesting that despite the liberalisation of sex that the film presents, the ideal objective in this film is still marriage. In this way the series is entirely conventional; most of the women are married and despite the frequent infidelity



and constant bed-hopping, marriage is imagined as the ultimate goal. This focus on marriage in *Window Cleaner* was queried by director Val Guest when he reviewed the screenplay. He complained, "in practically every case the woman is married, which I feel is a mistake. Engaged, divorced, steady boyfriend, carefully chaperoned etc – but why all *married*?" [11] Clearly Guest felt the conventionality of the screenplay was not fitting in an era of increased sexual permission, and yet married women dominate the film. This implies a great deal about the ideals and mores of the audience and suggests a deliberate targeting of thoroughly conventional middle-class and working-class audiences.

The material from the Klinger archive continuously reiterates the focus on the "unobtainable girl" from a higher class as well as on the working class family dynamic. This indicates that the production team were fully aware of the potency and importance of class within the film, and how it could be successfully utilised to maximise the film's appeal to the widest of audiences. [12] A fan letter from *Film and Filming* claimed *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* was, "a truly great *people's film* – an accurate and inspiring picture of the life of the average British working lad, his dreams and aspirations." [13] The presentation of Timmy as an average working lad was central to the film's popular appeal, just as notions of class and social mobility are central to the film's narrative. Combining the emphasis on class difference with the established narrative of the labourer or salesman, the film allows a high level of sexual interaction to take place between social classes. Social class is shown to be less firmly defined and fixed than in previous periods and sex is shown as a means to overcome class distinctions. Incidentally Michael Klinger found the idea of *Window Cleaner* as a great *people's film* hilarious and suggested using the enthusiastic praise in the film's publicity. [14] Clearly the production team recognised what the film offered to audiences but fully appreciated that the series would never win critical accolades.

The use of class as a means of identification for the audience is a heavily residual theme in British cinema, but the increased sexual content was a new and emergent strand. This demonstrated a shift from the sexual innuendo of the *Carry On* films towards sexual exhibition and display.

### **Sex and Comedy**

The British attitude to sex has always been presented on film as a combination of round-eyed prurience and deep-rooted embarrassment. Building on the easily traced trajectory of the *Carry On* series, *Window Cleaner* offered increased sexual content and titillation. Initial reviews of the screenplay noted, "it is somewhere in the class of those *Carry On* pictures, it could be called *Carry on Window Cleaner*." [15] Yet *Confessions* went further than *Carry On*, deliberately progressing from the "look but don't touch" attitude propagated by the earlier series. A star of the film *Carry On Girls* (1973), Robin Askwith, believes that the success of the *Confessions* series was due to its racy content, which surpassed



that of the *Carry On* series. He recalls, "they [*Carry On* producer Peter Rogers and director Gerald Thomas] never forgave me for the success of the *Confessions* films. It was where they should have gone, but they couldn't. They eventually tried it with *Carry on Emmanuelle* (1978). But it failed" (Needham). As a new series, the *Confessions* films could attempt things which an established series could not, and this innovation and break with convention helped create the British sex film. This established the British sex film as a new genre and allowed it to become self-referential, often alluding to the stereotypical attitudes towards sex previously deployed throughout British cinema. *Window Cleaner* offers none of the exotic sensuality or eroticism of films such as *Emmanuelle* (1975) and settles instead for being comical, effectively combining comedy and sex in an accessible way and demonstrating high levels of awareness in the way it utilises its sexual material and attempts to move beyond stereotypes and caricatures.

Michael Klinger referred to *Window Cleaner* as "a good, saucy, sexy comedy," implying that sex was only part of the formula and the comedy was just as important. [16] Christopher Wood noted in an early synopsis of *Pop Performer* that they should "keep the sex content jokey and not too heavy," reinforcing the idea of a tried and tested formula. [17] By allowing the audience to laugh at the antics on screen, *Confessions* effectively undercuts the residual embarrassment for an audience presented with sexual material. The humour and irony deployed diffuse possible discomfort by actively utilising this awkwardness as a deliberate comedic and filmic device. This allows for shared embarrassment and collusion on the part of the audience. It permits them to actively engage with the pantomime sexual behaviour being shown, while at the same time distancing themselves from the material and its potential to embarrass.

The awkwardness of Timmy's sexual behaviour is frequently contrasted throughout the film by his innuendo-laced accompanying voiceover. However, phrases like "retracting your ladder" and "squeezing out your chamois" are greeted on screen with pained glances rather than appreciative laughter. The innuendo and *double entendres* are shown to be even more tired than they are in the *Carry On* films. The difference here is that all the lines are delivered *and* received with a world-weary, cynical and jaundiced air; an air of having seen it all before and wondering "What else is new?" The use of deliberately tired innuendo that does not evoke the usual responses – the dirty chuckle of Sid James or Barbara Windsor's appreciative giggle of "saucy" – suggests that *Window Cleaner* is mocking the familiar British humour of the seaside postcard and the rude joke, whilst also building on the cultural capital they provide. This allows the audience a brief snigger at the innuendo, but the film does not rely upon it as the principal source of comedy. The awkwardness and embarrassment of the characters in the delivery of the dialogue permeates the text and reaches the audience, encouraging complicity and allowing for shared

embarrassment whilst at the same time offering reassurance in the conventionality of its sexual themes.

It is ironic that as a sex film, *Window Cleaner* is not so much about sex but about the problems and anxieties associated with sex. Timmy's failure to perform, his embarrassment at his sexual inexperience, his ineptitude, his fear of the female body and his acute suspicion of his own body all combine to offer a film which is thoroughly British in its attitudes towards sex and the body. Anxiety about male performance is combined with the more overt elements of comedy: slapstick and pratfalls, endless spilled drinks and being caught without clothes. Again complicity plays an important part here, for whilst the audience is being encouraged to sympathise with Timmy, they are also encouraged to laugh at his ineptitude. Embarrassment and awkwardness is further deployed in the film through constant representation of the sexual act as confusing, difficult and troublesome. Throughout the course of his sexual encounters, Timmy is constantly dirtied, either floundering into a puddle of washing-up liquid, or tumbling around in a coal cellar and being referred to as a "dirty little boy" by the lady of the house. Such episodes reinforce the notion of sex being dirty, shameful and shabby. Despite his occupation as a cleaner, Timmy's experiences often reflect the rumpled, the soiled and the dirty; the physical actuality of sex. The scene in which Timmy is seduced in a sea of washing-up bubbles perfectly encapsulates the duality of newly increased permission and deep-seated residual fear. Although a scene of sexual fantasy, the entire experience takes place on the kitchen floor – a location both domestically mundane and depressingly ordinary – with the lovers wrestling enthusiastically in detergent surrounded by saucepans and accompanied by Wurlitzer-style music that perfectly matches the high-tempo sexual parody. The awkwardness of the text, propagated through its attitude to sex and its deliberate deployment of embarrassment as a filmic device, is furthered by the performance style utilised and the aesthetic of the film text.

### **Aesthetics and Visual Style**

The visual style of *Window Cleaner* is located firmly in the world of the TV sitcom. The interior of the Lea family home is brightly lit and overly-full of quirky, useless items such as a gorilla suit, flippers and a moose's head. This cluttered and eclectic set dressing creates a deliberately cramped space that restricts movement and keeps the characters firmly within the confines of the domestic comedy: the front room within the terraced house. The characters are awkwardly situated within the frame, and the claustrophobic settings are furthered through other interior locations, namely Timmy's bedroom in the attic and the tiny hallway. Identification with Timmy's family was a crucial part of the film's appeal, but emphasis on working-class domestic life was initially seen as drab and uninteresting. In his detailed comments on the screenplay Val Guest complained:

We seem to be in everyone's kitchen at some time or another and a kitchen is dreary at the best of times unless there's a reason – like the thunderstorm sequence. The screenplay has a downbeat flavour because everything is described as working class – streets, semi-detached, kitchens, pubs, British Legion Hall etc. [\[18\]](#)

However it was this ordinariness that was crucial to the film's success. Simon Frith noted about the novel of *Window Cleaner* "the enjoyment in such reading lies in having one's values and wishes confirmed without effort, in moving at ease in a familiar world" (Frith 1978: 20). The familiarity of the characters and the attention given to "the minutiae of everyday life" is clearly part of the text's popular appeal, and these details are successfully utilised within the film adaptation with emphasis remaining firmly on the everyday, the ordinary and the conventional.

The claustrophobic settings, predominantly studio-bound filming and brightly-lit interiors all intimate the television sitcom aesthetic, but the film is also drawing on other contemporary trends in British cinema. Leon Hunt acknowledges that the horror films of the 1970s began to borrow freely from the sexploitation genre for their narratives, but there is also a crossover in terms of aesthetics (Hunt, 1998: 142). The budgetary limitations of horror and sexploitation comedy, and the personnel engaged on and in films that ranged across the low-budget spectrum indicate an interesting convergence.

Most of those who worked on *Window Cleaner* had experience of the low end of British cinema. Director of photography Norman Warwick worked on *The Abominable Dr Phibes* (1971), *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* (1971), *The Creeping Flesh* (1972) and *Tales From the Crypt* (1972) while production designer Robert Jones' film credits include *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde*, *Carry On Girls* (1973), *Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter* (1974) and later *The Likely Lads* (1976) and *Are You Being Served?* (1977). Assistant director Bert Betts worked on *Frankenstein Must be Destroyed* (1969), *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* and *The Legend of Hell House* (1973) whilst production supervisor Frank Bevis worked on contemporary-set thrillers *Psychomania* (1973) and *Dark Places* (1973). Casting ideas for *Confessions* also reflected this crossover from other low-budget genres with those suggested including horror favourites Veronica Carlson, Kate O' Mara, Adrienne Corri and Martine Beswick and *Carry On* regulars Maggie Nolan, Valerie Leon and Barbara Windsor.

Although this crossover may seem incidental, there are discernable stylistic similarities in the mise-en-scène of many of these low-budget films. Horror films with contemporary settings—including *Dracula AD 1972* (1972), *Asylum* (1972), *Frightmare* (1974) and *House of Mortal Sin* (1976)—feature the cramped locations, gaudy scenery and costumes and the recycled studio sets that all indicate the low-budget production. The locations for contemporary set horror, tended to be urban with a focus on everyday settings including a funfair

(*Frightmare*), an antique shop (*House of Mortal Sin*), a modelling agency (*House of Whipcord* [1974], *Virgin Witch*), a nightclub (*Frightmare*, *Dracula AD 1972*), a "swinging" house party (*Dracula AD 1972*, *House of Whipcord*), and a wide range of flats, houses and shops that all combine to create an aesthetic of easily identifiable urban Britain.

By relocating horror to the present day, removing the period trappings, careful class distinctions and depth of texture and costume, the horror films became peopled with rootless, socially mobile characters decked out in gaudy patterns, unrestricted by notions of class, age, gender and location. These characters are models, photographers, writers and make-up artists, a series of occupations that not only cashed in on the glamour the swinging 1960s had accorded them but that also allowed for social mobility. In horror films with contemporary settings, these characters operate in the same way as Timmy Lea; by bridging the gap between classes and allowing interaction to take place between people from a variety of backgrounds and in a variety of locations. The visual representation of the transient worker on the fringes of the traditional workplace is an important feature in films of the period, from the long-distance lorry driver in *Alfie Darling* (1975) to Malcolm McDowell's coffee salesman in *O Lucky Man!* (1973). Unlike the *Carry On* films, which parody easily identifiable institutions and occupations, Timmy Lea operates on the fringes of the workplace, allowing for a greater degree of social mobility and variety of location.

The style of performance deployed by the actors furthers the awkwardness and discomfort already noted. Robin Askwith's Timmy is ungainly and awkward, with slightly hunched shoulders, spindly legs, and long arms, clenched nervously at his sides. The mannerisms of the character suggest an uncertainty of masculinity manifested in the nervous laugh, verbal hesitancy and constant clumsiness. Askwith remembers that many of these mannerisms were the result of his own suggestions for the character and that he was given free rein to make the character of Timmy Lea as comical as possible (Needham). Askwith's weedy frame is emphasised by his snugly-fitting denims, tight white T-shirt and his small, decidedly non-erotic underwear which all suggest the child – a boy in a man's world, far out of his depth. When Timmy changes into his smart clothes for his dates with Elizabeth, his awkward posture and nervous mannerisms remain, but the jacket he wears appears too big for him, suggesting once again the boy, still growing into his smart clothes.

The women in the film, from Elizabeth and Rosie to the cleanliness-obsessed Mrs. Villiers and her Swedish au pair, are shown as being much more comfortable with their own bodies, their confidence and assurance often contrasting with Timmy's terror and ineptitude. However, the ease with which they are divested of their clothes suggests a real lack of control. The female body is far easier to access than the male's, with fewer zips and buckles in the clothing and easy entry through seams, sides and openings. Female clothing is

also fallible; skirts get ripped off, while the lack of underwear and low décolletages reveal the female body as a site of obvious consumption for Timmy's lascivious gaze.

The exception to this ease of access is Elizabeth, whose clothing constantly frustrates Timmy. The struggle with Elizabeth's clothing is, of course, mirrored by Timmy's struggle with her body. She wears short skirts, with her legs on display inviting easy access, yet she continually rebuffs Timmy's fumbblings, underlining her position within the text as the "nice girl," the one he can look at but not touch. As shown, this identification of Elizabeth as unobtainable was seen as one of the most important aspects of the film. Additionally it locates her as a provocative tease. Through the deliberate display of her body, she arouses sexual feelings in Timmy but then refuses to allow him to touch her; everything is accessible but not available. Timmy's attempts to reconcile his desire for her with her desire to prevent him is suggestive of a wider struggle taking place within masculinity as men attempted to come to terms with newly accessible, liberated women who were sexualised beings with sexual agendas of their own.

The awkwardness of much of the performance style, the settings, costumes and presentation of the characters reinforces notions of embarrassment whilst at the same time acting as a point of identification for the audience and focusing on issues of class. The film also addresses wider notions of gender, specifically in its positioning of Timmy as a typical example of 1970s British masculinity. But is this really as straightforward as it appears? Let us now consider how the film identifies some of the most important aspects of the 1970s social period and how these are formulated within the text.

### **Changing Times**

Leon Hunt argues that characters like Timmy Lea offer a "nostalgic evocation of the masculine presence" and present "an almost unprecedented empowering of the male gaze" (Hunt, 1998: 57). However, if we momentarily ignore Timmy's raging libido, the character that remains is kindly, clumsy and inept. What subverts this image is not so much Timmy's lascivious behaviour – which only occurs quite late in the film – but rather his inner commentary; his voiceover dialogue is full of "phwoar" and "cor," much in the manner of a boy leering at dirty magazines. The dichotomy between the rabid sexual aggression of Timmy's dialogue and his physically inept and inexperienced fumbling could not be more marked. His series of sexual encounters are either interrupted, consist of inept grappling or involve him being seduced, victimised or bullied into bed. Timmy represents the growing awareness of the child to sexual behaviour. His sexual education is undertaken by Sid, who attempts to get him laid. In finally reaching sexual maturity, he becomes empowered but also recognizes and represents complex anxieties about sexual performance and sexual satisfaction from a male perspective; concerns which do not entirely fit with notions of traditional masculinity. Anxieties about masculinity and performance run

throughout the narrative and the character of Timmy is not the only character presented as a site to address these concerns. In an early scene, his sister Rosie threatens Sid with her embroidery scissors over his constant philandering and threatens to "chop it off" if he strays again. At the end of the film, Timmy hospitalises his cheating brother-in-law with a deluge from a hosepipe; he has literally castrated Sid, once with the hosepipe and also in the following scene when Sid is tied to the hospital bed and Timmy looms over him, enthusiastically consuming a banana with eager gulps.

The frequent undercutting of innuendo previously noted again demonstrates the extent to which the male characters are being challenged by their female counterparts; suggesting that the aggressive male gaze and masculine authority of the central protagonists are not as fixed as conventional readings of the text initially suggest. Elizabeth and Rosie are both presented as assertive, knowing females who are fully aware of male sexual behaviour and boldly challenge the masculinity of the gaze and often return it with indulgent interest. Many of the older women take charge in their sexual encounters, suggesting a predatory enthusiasm that reinforces Timmy's naiveté and inexperience. The patterns of speech, tone of voice, body language and the frequent infantilising of Timmy demonstrate how females within the text are enthusiastic and pro-active sexual partners. As Val Guest complained of the screenplay, "Timmy never 'makes' any female – they ALL 'make' him. He's attacked, undressed, led to bed by forceful, hunting women. If ever Women's Lib had a case, this is it." [19]

Here "Women's Liberation" is negatively associated with female sexual pleasure. Unlike in *Carry On Girls*, where the chief role of the Women's Liberation movement is to oppose the sexual display of the beauty pageant, the assertive, "hunting" females in *Window Cleaner* are keen to participate fully and enthusiastically in the sexual experience, not object to it. This female enthusiasm for sex is configured as "Women's Lib" as if this is the only possible reason for women's appropriation of the sexual experience. These anxieties about women and their position within the text articulate deeper anxieties about the growing independence of women.

However, the main function of the women in *Window Cleaner* is as objects of consumption. Val Guest felt dubious about the screenplay because, "Too many of the birds are described as being unattractive. If you're putting over other people's fantasies it must be bad film-wise – getting involved with so many unattractive or sleazy females." [20] A range of female "types" are included within the text, from the mother to the virgin to the whore and the lesbian, but overall the women are physically attractive, sexually demanding, cynically pragmatic, faithless and suspicious. There are few dutiful wives here, and promiscuity is rife in a modern climate of sexual permission that was now applied to women as well as men. However, as demonstrated, the films are highly conventional, separating encounters into those which allow pleasure and



those which lead to marriage. In this way the range of sexual encounters that Timmy experiences both propels the narrative and propels him towards Elizabeth, the ideal wife. What prevents this union is her faithlessness, not his, again positioning Timmy as the hapless innocent who had a lucky escape. More pragmatically, it also enabled the film to remain open-ended with none of the narrative resolution that would have prevented a sequel.

## Conclusion

As an example of successful British filmmaking in a troubled period, *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* must be recognised as a significant cultural text. The film's engagement with issues of sex, comedy and class make it useful in helping to understand the period. While the film foregrounds male sexuality, it does not affirm conventional masculine dominance. The deliberate characterisation of Timmy as hapless and naive rather than sexually confident suggests that the text is not as straightforward as it first appears. The film offers a male-focused text in which the central character is a manual worker, a typical everyman. *Window Cleaner*'s success and appeal must be seen within a context of changing masculine roles. In a decade of extreme gender instability, Timmy Lea is a conventional figure who operates in his own work environment, unaffected by strikes, unemployment or recession yet whose position as a manual worker makes him highly desirable. The theme of the handyman or casual worker and his sexual adventures is a popular one in the 1970s and strongly links manual labour and sex. Films including *Window Cleaner* strengthened this link in a period that saw a decline in traditional industries such as mining and manufacturing – all occupations heavily redolent of working-class masculinity. *Window Cleaner* allows this facet of masculinity to continue unchallenged by economics, feminism or changing masculine identities. This combination of evasion and social comment makes *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* significant within the sexploitation genre. While maintaining the elements of titillation and high comedy which characterise sexploitation films of the period, *Window Cleaner* foregrounds the narrative of the itinerant tradesman and combines it with a great deal of social comment that is carefully disguised through the conventions of the TV sitcom and the low-budget aesthetics.

The UWE papers document Klinger's determination to make the films profitable and to maintain the formula of sex, comedy and working-class life that he felt was central to the series. Such tenacity demonstrates how Klinger believed that the film's winning formula could be replicated again and again. Indeed, his desire to make further films continued throughout the decade and beyond, with plans for another *Confessions* film being suggested as late as 1986. [\[21\]](#) The films were not critically acclaimed yet they appealed to audiences and made a great deal of money. As Klinger himself wrote to David Puttnam when he attempted to resuscitate the series in the 1980s, "the *Confessions* films will never win awards but did cause Columbia British to pay corporation tax for the



first time." [22] Klinger's obituary in *The Times* recognised his skill in bringing popular, commercial projects to fruition, noting that "film-making to him was the business of finding subjects with wide popular appeal and making them as economically as possible" (anon.). Such an epitaph perfectly encapsulates the *Confessions* films: a combination of sex and comedy with audience appeal, made on a strict budget to maximise profits. The combination of financial acumen and acute cultural perspicacity provided by the production team of Klinger, Smith, Cohen, Guest and Wood created a popular, nostalgic comedy that addressed relevant issues of class, sex and gender. As well as providing British cinema with one of its most unlikely successes of the period, the film spawned a raft of imitations, which all capitalised on sex, titillation and farce and demonstrated the possibilities of the British sexploitation film.

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## Notes

[1] Figures taken from the un-catalogued Michael Klinger Papers accessed from University of the West of England, Bristol, hereafter abbreviated to MKP, Swiftdown Company file, payments made for the film from the British Film Fund Agency.

[2] Figures from Southampton Odeon accessed from accounts supplied to the author by former cinema manager James Tilmouth.

[3] MKP, *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* file 1, RMR Eckart from Star Group Ltd to Michael Klinger, letter dated 14 May 1973.

[4] MKP, *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* file 1, Ed Gerenson comments on Christopher Wood's screenplay, letter dated 16 February 1973.

[5] MKP, *Confessions from a Holiday Camp* file, Michael Klinger to Gregg Smith, Clive Parsons and Norman Cohen, letter dated 7 January 1977.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] MKP, *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* file 1, Clive Parsons to Michael Klinger letter dated 12 December 1973.

[9] MKP, *Confessions of a Pop Performer* file, Gregg Smith memo dated 5 February 1974.

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[10] MKP, *Confessions of a Pop Performer* file, Christopher Wood memo undated (circa 1974).

[11] MKP, *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* file, Val Guest to Michael Klinger and Gregg Smith, letter dated 5 July 1973.

[12] MKP, *Confessions of a Window Cleaner*, *Confessions of a Pop Performer*, *Confessions from a Holiday Camp* and *Confessions of a Plumber's Mate* files, comments from Michael Klinger, Christopher Wood and Gregg Smith about these aspects of the series.

[13] MKP, *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* file, letter from *Film and Filming* (undated).

[14] MKP, *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* file, Michael Klinger to Tom Nicholas at Columbia, letter dated 1 October 1975.

[15] MKP, *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* file 1, Ed Gerenson's comments on Christopher Wood's screenplay, dated 16 February 1973.

[16] MKP, *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* file 1, Michael Klinger to Ken Maidment at Columbia, letter dated 19 September 1973.

[17] MKP, *Confessions of a Pop Performer* file, Christopher Wood memo undated (circa 1974).

[18] MKP, *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* file, Val Guest to Michael Klinger and Gregg Smith letter dated 5 July 1973.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] MKP, *Further Confessions* file, details on unmade *Confessions* projects.

[22] MKP, *Further Confessions* file, Michael Klinger to David Puttnam, telex dated 9 July 1986.

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James Tilmouth's accounts from Southampton Odeon cinema 1970-1980 (given to the author by Mr Tilmouth).

### **Selected Filmography**

*Confessions of a Driving Instructor* (1976) Dir. Norman Cohen. Columbia Pictures.

*Confessions From a Holiday Camp* (1977) Dir. Norman Cohen. Columbia Pictures.

*Confessions of a Pop Performer* (1975) Dir. Norman Cohen. Columbia Pictures.

*Confessions of a Window Cleaner* (1974) Dir. Val Guest. Columbia Pictures.